FILMS

Photos by Samir Hachen

SARA KATHRYN ARLEDGE

By Samir Hachem

Movies move, or at least they're supposed to. Motion is what adds life, energy and depth to that which still photography and the theatre can only simulate. Movies are a part of life and not only a reflection of it. The element of time may decrease their impact (since you can't freeze a moment in space and *possess* it, as in still photography) but it also brings them closer to reality. More than any other art form, film interprets reality instead of merely being an expansion of it. In the films of Sara Kathryn Arledge, an avant garde film pioneer of the forties, motion *is* the message. There's rarely a hidden meaning behind the act of dancing or jumping or walking. The movement is the celebration and it's full of magic and wonder. In Arledge's world, in fact, life itself *is* the movement, the dance, the joke.

A 69-year-old witty conversationalist with an affinity for Martinelli's Sparkling apple cider and gardenias, the Pasadena filmmaker/painter made her first film, **Introspection,** in 1941. **What is a Man?** followed seventeen years later. In between she taught art and cinema and "played" with slides and transparencies, and in 1978 she made three more films, **Interior Garden I & II** and **Tender Images.** The Pasadena Filmforum has presented a number of programs, chronicling her work and wisdom (she often takes the stage to recite bits and pieces of sayings she makes up and preserves) and there seems to be a sudden rediscovering of and interest in her. An East Coast filmmaker, Brandee Prowell, is planning a documentary on her, and Arledge is beginning preproduction on her first large scale film in 22 years.

Almost everything happens twice in Arledge's films. There's a certain revelatory "Ahhhness" that one experiences upon seeing one of such actions for the second time. "Ah, now I understand. It fits," we say to ourselves, grinning with satisfaction for having solved this tricky puzzle. Lily Tomlin used to say "maybe if we listened to it more carefully, history wouldn't repeat itself so much," and Dr. Henri Laborit, the French biologist who has done extensive research on the source of aggression in mammals, has recently declared that "a living creature is a memory that acts," and consequently repeats itself.

The first image in **Introspection** is that of a dancer's head turning around in circles, and it's also the key to the film's purpose. The rest of the film features a variety of dancers performing with one or two parts of their bodies at a time. In one scene we'll be viewing the arms and shoulders with the rest of the body cut off, blackened out, or a disembodied hand, swimming in a greenish bowl, or a mummy-like masked head attached only to the upper part of a chest. There's no flow to the dancers' movements, no unifying element. They exist separately from each other, between fade-outs. Arledge's point here is that those detached or mutilated legs and arms exist, even if with no relation to anything other. It's not coincidental that her films also lack unity. In her production notes she describes one of them as a prelude to a longer film, and so what she's really telling us is that **all** films are essentially preludes to larger and longer and deeper films, that all lives are preludes, or rehearsals, to others, more fulfilling and "complete." It was George Burns who said "life is what goes on while you're planning other things." Things bigger and more ambitious, no doubt. Which brings us to the flaws in **Introspection** and **What is a Man?** Like the woman who conceived them, they're uncommitted in parts, and a little unfocused here and there. But a unique collective vision emerges strongly, one that's compassionate and gutsy. Arledge clearly went with her intuition and her crew members' gut feelings and said fuck the rules and the books. She asked Kodak specialists endless questions about color gels and filters and experimented with stuff never touched or attempted before. Her mistakes are ones of calculation (misplacing a cut, disrupting a rhythm etc.) and not of impulse.

It was either Susan Sontag or Joan Didion who once told us that a work of art is never finished, but simply abandoned. That's pretty much the case with the content and form of Arledge's work. The ability to let go (as opposed to give up or surrender) with grace is an art and a necessity. The dancers in **Introspection** turn around and then disappear to stun and stimulate us. It's for us they're performing and they know it. Seeing them is more important than their sight, their images. Therefore the film is not finished until it's seen, and that's the only life it can have, one that is shared and moving. The people she depicts in **What is a Man?** are flawed and "unfinished" in a sense. They smile and dance and make jokes, though, and Arledge approves of them and their deeds. They, in fact, **like** being flawed "works in progress." They know that they'll die once they're completed. In that sense, the circle of life that is being presented here is a tragic and fatalistic one because even if it never actually ends (it hypothetically connects back to the beginning) it stops. And stopping is a lack of movement, and that is the saddest and emptiest of all states and stages (that's why the second film ends with an etcetra taking the stead of the customary end). For Arledge to be still is to be dead, frozen. It's therefore ironic that the camera never moves in the first half of **Introspection** (a title that refers to a moving trip to the inside). The subject, instead, is the movement, and its celebration, the pace in the cutting and shifting.

What Is a Man? (in which the "s" and the "a" and "n" are dropped from the second and fourth word to form "I am") is really more about a woman than it is about a man or even Man. Inspired by **Finnegan's Wake** (in a very satirical approach, you understand) it chronicles the fate of a woman from a visit to a used car salesman (named Beawolf), to a physician, and ultimately a sigh-cryatryst. "Teacher, teacher I declare. I see somebody's underwear," she announces, and when minutes later she asks whether she can leave the womb, the doctor replies "From inhibitions unexcelled you're asking me to be expelled? By thirty two you ought to know, if you gotta go you gotta go." The woman's story (her name is Somebodyelsie) is intercut with footage of laboratory experiments on rats, used to stress the fatalistic nature of existence, a notion and a technique that Alain Resnais and Dr. Henri Laborit have just recently reintroduced to mainstream filmmaking in **Mon Oncle D'Amerique.** The music we hear in the characters' rhyming dialogue is sort of prophetic, just like that circle that repeats itself. In one of the funnier scenes of **Man** a man and a woman meet on a bus but have nothing to say to each other, so they unconsciously repeat the lines from **Macbeth** after the murder of Duncan. They don't just recite them, they **repeat** them, for these are creatures not in control of their lives.

The more you look at her films the more patterns emerge. Like the circle and the movement, the joke without a punch line is a stape. It's in essence another "unfinished business," like all the dinners that are never finished in Bunuel's bourgeoise satires. It's

like the ride on the lift up the mountain near the end of **Stroszek,** and like that crazy dancing chicken at the end of the same film. They keep going round and round, but they don't get anywhere, not really. That's what Arledge is basically telling all of us, that we don't get anywhere, but that that is O.K. The journey is therefore more important than the destination. In February of 1977 Arledge published a series of articles, entitled "Madness in Memory," in which she talked about the year she spent in 1956 in a state mental hospital (committed for what was then termed "thought disorder and diagnosed schizophrenia"). In her opening paragraph she writes: "'If you want to bring peace to the world, start walking in circles.'" It was a little *voice* within her, she later tells us, which said that. That voice can be heard throughout her work too. The woman has had to learn how to leave things undone gracefully all of her life (is that why she gets up and very shyly walks away from the circle of cast and crew members, playing musical chairs at the end of *Man?,* and she's also had to learn how to go on beginning again (thus, the new project).

Sara Kathryn Arledge is unique as an experimental filmaker because she has never set out to be an auteur, working alone like the rest of the avant-gardists. She works collaboratively to realize a vision that has been retouched and reworked and experienced. The accidents in her films are a part of the that style too. Also refreshing about what she did in those days are her sense of humor, her healthy depiction of sexuality, and her delving into the universal argument of art and reality. She chose pretentious titles for some of her films to make us laugh. She isn't **really** after defining Man or anything like that, and by no means is he lecturing us. All she's doing is playing with a fire; she's naughty, but she's witty, and we don't mind the riddles and the pranks. Somewhere in the middle of **What is a Man?** there's this shot of the ocean, with the waves gently forming semi-circles that dissolve to oblivion as they reach the rocky shore. It's a strangely sensual image and one that doesn't quite relate to anything immediately before or after it. It's also Arledge's favorite minute or two of that film. Most curious though is the fact she did not shoot it. She sent her director of photography to "get" it. She calls it the point where nature is represented in its serene female aspect (psychologists maintain that it is the so-called "feminine" side in all of us that acts on guts and the masculine that acts on rationale. Maybe this further explains Arledge's uncalculated decisions and structure). She is also fond or reminiscing about the people at the Kodak processing labs who refused to deliver prints of her second film because in her Adam and Eve scene a woman's nipple was showing, which meant that she had to reshoot it and light it differently.

The obsession with nature and its reproduction, or art and reality, is best illustrated in the scene that shows a bunch of bean plants booming within seconds (it took three months actually to shoot) under artificial light, and to the sounds of clocks, alarm rings and honking horns. For that matter, the snake that pops up between Adan and Eve is formed by car headlights, seen through a window. The apple is also no real, but an image on an oil painting. Is this to imply the artificiality of sin or the concept of punishment for sin? And why are the two nudes replaced by scientific diagrams with latin names for the reproductive organ? Or why does Somebodyelsie tells her doctor "I cling to the schizofringes of art and reality. I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me"? I'm not sure I know the answers, or that I need to, but I'm sure glad they're there, with loose ends, unfinished business and all.